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 September 15, 2019
 #2—It's Ok if You're Not Ok

Let Go of What You Can't Control
Psalm 46, Matthew 6: 25-34

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present^[a] help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*
⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
 the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of the city;^[b] it shall not be moved;
 God will help it when the morning dawns.
⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
 he utters his voice, the earth melts.
⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.^[c] *Selah*
⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
 see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
 he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
 he burns the shields with fire.
¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
 I am exalted among the nations,
 I am exalted in the earth."
¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
 the God of Jacob is our refuge.^[d] *Selah*

This week we remembered the tragedy of September 11th, 18 years ago.

In the ***days and weeks after 9/11***, churches were full,
 And many of them ***turned to this Psalm*** for hope and comfort,
 a reminder that no matter what happens to us,
 God is in control.

Billy Graham preached from it in the National Cathedral.

Many believers also sang Martin Luther's famous hymn based on this Psalm,

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”, calling forth God’s power and presence.
Susan Olson, Feasting on the Word Year C Volume 4, pg. 321.

These are ***powerful words*** for us,
especially when life feels out of control.

I wonder, when do you feel a little out of control?
We all have those moments, don't we?

And you know what we ***usually do*** when life feels out of control?
We try to take control,
of anything we can get our hands on, right?

Control is ***not always a bad thing.***
To control something can be a positive—
like having self-control,
or control of one’s skills, or appetites.

But when we start ***moving into the realm of ‘control freak’***,
Well that’s a different story, isn’t it?
No one wants to be near a control freak, at home or work or church,
People don't want to be micromanaged,
or be near someone who just has to have everything their way or the highway!

Yet, most of us have struggled with being controlling,
At one time or another.

I was reading Christian artist and author Sheila Walsh—
she wrote a book that inspired this series,
called ***“It’s Okay Not To Be Okay”***.
She has an interesting take on the issue of control.
She believes that much of our need for control,
or to be controlling,
comes from a sense of ***shame***.
She writes about how this makes sense if there were negative events in
childhood (which covers about all of us, right?).
These negative events early on, can lead to a need for control later on.

For example, people who have suffered any kind of abuse or assault,
 They experience the feeling of being out of control---which is horrible.
 So, they later try to control their environment,
 To **compensate** for that horrible feeling.
 This is the root of much addiction, dysfunctional relationships,
 eating disorders....
 It's like saying, **'this area I get to control'**.
 But the problem is controlling something out of shame, crushes us.
 It's like a **prison**.

Sheila Walsh, *It's Okay Not To Be Okay*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 2018, pg. 95-96

Because **we've ALL been wounded**,
we all have this struggle in one way or another with control.

I believe it's not just those who suffered abuse.
 It's also those who have suffered through **natural disasters**,
or man-made ones,
 like war, terror attacks, or gun violence.
 When things feel out of control,
we long to control everything we possibly can!

I once went to the house of a parishioner,
 who had **survived an EF-5 tornado, and lost everything**.
 She became so concerned with this happening again
 that she took control of her stuff to a new level.
 When I arrived at her house (where she lived alone),
 she told me to look around and help myself to anything that I saw.
 I didn't understand until she showed me the extra bedrooms---
 Wow. They were full, I mean full of brand-new, never worn,
 tags still-on clothes and shoes!
 That's when she explained how things got out of hand after the tornado—
 it led to an addiction to acquiring things,
 much more than she would ever need or use,
 so she was starting to give it away.
 It all stemmed from feeling so out of control after the storm.

Is there anything that YOU are trying to control?

Do you know ***where that comes from?***

Trying to control usually causes more problems, doesn't it?

Are you trying to control your spouse or kids?
 Your workplace?
 Is it your eating? Or drinking? Or spending?

I think ***we all struggle in one of these areas***, you know?
 Because we've all been hurt.
 We've all suffered.
 We've all hit the wall of feeling out of control.

And what is our ***natural response?***
 To take charge.
 To control whatever we can.

Which as Christians, is the ***exact OPPOSITE of what God wants for us!***
 This Psalm today, the Gospel message today,
 Really the entire Bible
 Reminds us that there is ***ONE, and ONLY one person***
 Who is really in control of life.
 And that person is NOT US.
It's God.

That's ***easy to say, but hard to believe*** at times, isn't it?

I mean, ***where is our God*** when the world seems to be falling apart?
 Where was God on 9/11?
 Where is God in our suffering and struggles?

The answer is actually very clear in scripture—
God is right beside us.
 That's where God can ALWAYS be found.
 Right next to us, walking with us,
 through the fires and floods of life!

This does NOT answer the question of why suffering happens,
 Or how a good and holy God can allow suffering.
 I think we won't understand that on this side of heaven!

But we are ***promised that God is always with us***—no matter what.
 And God suffers, and mourns, and laments, as we struggle.
 We see that in Jesus—who experienced EVERY human emotion with us!
 Listen to Hebrews 4:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Believing that God is in control is NOT easy, not at all.

I mean, we have all suffered,
 And some of us are suffering yet today---
 And it's easy to fall into ***self-pity, or the blame game.***
 After all, we all get hurt by other people, don't we?
 How can God be in control?

The ***story of Joseph*** is found in Genesis 37-50.

Do you remember Joseph?
 He was the baby of the family, and the favorite of his father Jacob—who gave him a special coat of many colors, leading his jealous brothers to rise up against him. Joseph didn't help the situation—because he'd had a dream from God, where he saw his brothers bowing down to him! You can see where this is headed.....

Joseph TELLS them the dream, instead of keeping it to himself,
 And they decide to not only throw him in a well,
 They ***sell him to slave traders on their way to Egypt***,
 and tell their father he is dead.

Now, imagine you are Joseph.

And you know that ***God has a great plan*** for your life.
 What's going through your head when all this disaster happens?
 He surely thought, my brothers are ruining my life!!!

In Egypt Joseph is bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.
 And there is some hope, because he works hard—even though this is not the plan for his life.

And, he is recognized for his good work (Gen. 39:1-2).
But then life takes another bad turn.

He is falsely accused of raping Potiphar's wife, and thrown in prison.

Guess what he's feeling now?

But in prison, he continues to work hard.

And, he is recognized for his strength and goodness,
and given special attention....

he befriends the cupbearer and baker for Pharaoh,
and asks them to remember him when they are released.
Which does NOT happen.

Joseph DOES eventually get out years later,

because of his ability to interpret dreams for Pharaoh.

He is promoted to Pharaoh's right hand man,
and given charge of the food in Egypt during a famine...
which is when his brothers come looking for food,
having no idea their brother is still alive!

What do you think Joseph ***wanted to do*** when he saw his abusive brothers?
We can only imagine, right?

But you know what he really did?

He said this in Genesis 50:19-20,

But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

Joseph's story takes place over ***more than a dozen years***
after his dream about his future.....

How many times do you think he had ***doubts?***

How often do you think he ***wanted to give up?***

What would ***you have done, and felt?***

He likely wanted to become a serious control freak!

But instead, ***by the grace of God, with those little signs of hope,***

He saw that there was a bigger plan in place,

And God was in control.

One favorite verse of many of us is **Jeremiah 29:11**

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your good, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

I love that.

It's on a plaque in my home.

But Sheila Walsh points out that we usually leave out the verse before it:

*For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's **seventy years** are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.*

Sheila Walsh, *It's Okay Not To Be Okay*, Baker: Grand Rapids, 2018, pg. 105.

Ah. That is not very plaque-worthy is it?

We don't realize that sometimes **God's plans and promises take a long time!**
God's timing is not our own!

But what about the bigger question:

Like, can other people ruin our lives, and God's plan for us?

They can, right????

For the people of God, the answer is actually----NO.

People can hurt us, they can disappoint us, they can cause us suffering,
They can get us off track.

But God is still in control, no matter what they do to us.

God is in charge of our hearts and lives,
not anyone or anything else.

I think ***we know this deep down, even without faith.***

Isn't this what we mean when gun violence or terrorism strikes?

And we all say, ***we won't let them win—we will go on and live our lives!***

As people of faith, ***we have all the more reason to keep on living,***
And not give into the temptation of self-pity, or blame.

Because God is still in control.

God is ALWAYS in control.

We ***may not understand*** God's ways or God's timing,

But God is God, and we are not.

No one can ruin our lives---our lives are held by God's own hand.

We are under God's wings.

Which is what we hear in **Psalm 91:**

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,^[a]*

²*will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."*

³*For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;*

⁴*he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;*

The truth is, we have to LET GO of everything we can't control,

(which truthfully, is EVERYTHING....We really control nothing!)

Even ourselves---that's even something God helps us with!

So, we have to ***let go, and give it all*** to God.

Our lives are often a mess,

And this world is ALWAYS a mess,

But God is not.

God is sure, and stable, our rock and our refuge,

Our help in every time of trouble,

Even when mountains tremble, and waters roar and foam.

That is the promise of not only Psalm 46, but of the whole Bible.

That is the promise of Jesus, who told his followers what would happen to him, and then said in John 16:33: *"I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution.*

But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

As I was talking to the kids about Psalm 46 today,

I mentioned a very famous phrase in it:

Be still, and know that I am God.

I love that, don't you?

We may hear those words and think sometimes, yeah right, be still.

Who has time for that?

Who can just stop what they are doing and spend time being still?

It doesn't even sound appealing to many people!

But the Hebrew words ***Be still***, raphah, does not mean get yourself all curled up in a comfy chair in solitude (as great as that sounds!).

It's more like the ***words of a parent speaking to a fidgety child---Be still!***
In other words, it means stop, cease!

Stop what you are doing, and PAY ATTENTION to me!

LET GO of what's in your hands, and give it all to me!

Susan Olson, Feasting on the Word Year C Volume 4, pg. 325.

Be still, and know that I am God.

Stop what you are doing, and pay attention to our Savior.

Let go, and let God be in charge.

God is God, we are not.

Today we are ***singing the promise that comes when we let go, And let God be in control.***

We are singing, ***On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand***

The words of Hymn writer Edward Mote are so amazing:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name
Oh Christ the solid Rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand*

Sheila Walsh, It's Okay Not To Be Okay, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 2018, pg. 107.

Friends, hear the Good News today: It's Ok If You Are Not Ok.

None of us are really ok!

And we're all in this together!

May we ***take comfort in the promise that God is always with us,***

And may we ***let go*** of everything we are trying to control,

And ***let God be in control*** of our lives.

May we ***be still, and pay attention*** to the One who is our rock and refuge.

And to that, all God's people said, Amen.